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The Picture of Dorian Gray: A Dimensional Doppelgänger

Though the notion of dimensional theory was not widely acknowledged until Albert Einstein's work was popularized in the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of a fourth dimension was not entirely unheard of in the realm of literature. Writings as old as Plato's *The Republic* work with the theories of two-dimensional space and beyond, largely evident in "The Allegory of the Cave," where shadows are confined to a two dimensional existence on a cave wall. However, several Victorian authors of the 19th century were able to leave their mark on dimensional thinking. Edwin A. Abbott's beloved satirical novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* uses a world built of two-dimensional characters to establish a rigid social class structure built upon only two-dimensional space, and is a quintessential literary work of the late 19th century that deals with dimensions. The novel itself did not achieve much success upon publication, though it is not out of the realm of possibility to deduce that many Victorian authors, such as H. G. Wells and Oscar Wilde, may have read it. Still, an idea that is tragically absent in almost every manner of criticism relating to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the importance of the fourth dimension as a plane of time. The topic of youth is of profound importance in the novel, as is the passage of time and its effect on Dorian and the painting. Early on in the novel, Dorian makes the wish that the painting would age and decay so that he might remain young and beautiful. A basic understanding of the plot would agree with this reversal and its inevitable occurrence, though it has been constantly ignored that in making this wish, Dorian steps out of the fourth dimension and uses the painting as a stand in—a sort of non-sentient doppelgänger that steps into the fourth dimension of time and duration, and is ultimately subjugated to the effects of time.

Given the undeniable evidence that Wells was aware and interested in dimensional theory, it is likely that Oscar Wilde may have been as well. As a playwright, author,

philosopher, and student of literature during the 1880's, there remains the possibility that Wilde may have been aware of the rise of dimension-related thinking. Furthermore, in order for one to properly understand Wilde's affiliation with dimensional theory, *The Canterville Ghost* ought to be referenced. The short story chronicles the tale of a ghost plaguing a family in the English countryside (Wilde and Brown). Popularly, the story is examined through a life and death binary, and analyzed through a somewhat obtuse moral scope; though, many tend to ignore the importance of dimensions in the story, most specifically with the ghost. Wilde does not directly reference the fourth dimension or any other mathematical dimension, but the fact that one of his earliest published stories contains a character that exists in another special dimension proves that Wilde was, at the very least, aware and interested in dimensionality. In addition, Abbott's *Flatland* was published in 1884, while Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* was published only three years later in 1887. *Flatland's* popularity, as well as the popularity of Charles Howard Hinton's "Scientific Romances" (a series of pamphlets in which dimensionality recurs, written from 1884-1888) would certainly have been an influential force in Victorian literature, which affected many authors as well (Bork 335-36). It has also been accepted in many circles of Victorian study that Hinton's dimensional work exceeded that of Wells and Abbott (St. Clair 48).

If one wishes to properly understand how dimensionality relates to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a true understanding of the fourth dimension is in order. In the context of the *Fin de Siecle*, perhaps H.G. Wells defined the application of space-time and dimensions best. A short eleven years after *Flatland* debuted, Wells published *The Time Machine,* a novel centered on "The Time Traveller," who builds a machine capable of transporting him through the fourth dimension: time. The idea that the fourth dimension is of time is explained by The Time Traveller quite early on in the novel:

> Filby became pensive. "Clearly," the Time Traveller proceeded, "any real body must have extension in *four* directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness, and—Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a

> fourth, Time. There is, however, a tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three dimensions and the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives." (Wells 5-6)

The conceptualization is, of course, the most difficult aspect to overcome when pondering a fourth dimension of time. Abbott describes this in *Flatland* by introducing a two dimensional square to a three dimensional sphere; the latter object is one that can literally step into the third dimension, rendering itself entirely invisible to the two-dimensional square. The same concept is perpetuated in the relation of the fourth dimension to the third, in that the fourth dimension becomes, essentially, a higher plane of existence that cannot be perceived by beings of the lesser dimensions, or as Wells writes, "'It is only another way of looking at Time. *There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it*"'(Wells 6). Wilde experiments with this idea in *The Canterville Ghost*, where the antagonist is a being that exists in an other-worldly dimension that the family cannot perceive.

One may begin to understand this in an analytical reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's most famous novel. The novel works intensely with the notion of beauty and preserving it, and time's deterioration of the self. The painting that Basil Hallward creates of Dorian's essence becomes the symbolic opposite of the real Dorian, yet only one of them can be left affected by time. When the painting begins to age, Dorian remains young; when Dorian ages, the painting holds the initial beauty that Basil bestowed upon it. The passage of time, then, becomes a dominant force in Dorian's story, as his moral degeneration leaves him free of age's harm. In this way, the painting is bound by the four dimensions: breadth, length, width, and most importantly, time. However, it is the fourth dimension of time that serves to shape the evolution of Dorian's character.

The most prominent topic in the novel that is in relation to the fourth dimension is that of youth. In regards to Lord Henry's influence, Dorian quickly becomes obsessed with the notion of remaining young and handsome, as youth is the only thing worth having in life. This builds upon the strict binary of old and young, or ugliness and beauty. The novel

associates that beauty and youth are of one sacred unit which must never be lost. The only way for youth to be lost is due to duration in the passage of time, or a manner of existence in the fourth dimension. Basil's painting of Dorian and Dorian the character seem to exist solely as affectations of time, in that they exist as the "effects" to time's "cause." Moreover, only one of them exists in the fourth dimension at any given moment. The painting's manner of possessing all of the physical evil in Dorian's immorality illustrates its consistent existence in the fourth dimension where it is damaged by the passage of time, while Dorian's ability to remain youthful throughout the majority of his life acts as evidence to his existence outside of the fourth dimension. Ordinarily, all persons would exist in the fourth dimension due to aging and the passage of time, though they would not generally conceptualize it in everyday life. Dorian's ability to remain youthful and untouched by time illustrates the fact that he is existing outside of the fourth dimension.

Dorian first begins to ponder the concepts of youth during an exchange in his first meeting with Lord Henry:

> "You really must not allow yourself to become sunburnt. It would be unbecoming."
>
> "What can it matter?" cried Dorian Gray, laughing, as he sat down on the seat at the end of the garden.
>
> "It should matter everything to you, Mr. Gray."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Because you have the most marvelous youth, and youth is the one thing worth having. (Wilde 62)

Such an interaction between characters leaves Dorian with his first real consideration of youth, and therefore, the passage of time. In some ways, the reader can view this as Dorian's introduction to the fourth dimension, and perhaps the first instance where his character begins to ponder the importance of youth, and the duration of it. One can also notice the pairing of youth with beauty in Henry's words, as he advises Dorian to never let himself be "unbecoming." Later in their conversation, Lord Henry continues to emphasize the importance of youth: "We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of

the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!" (Wilde 63). Naturally, a conscious reader is right to be wary of any real advice Lord Henry would have to give, yet there appears to be a commentary being made on the degenerative effect that existence in the time-dimension has on an individual. This conversation illustrates Dorian's introduction to the effects of time and the fourth dimension, and symbolically begins to establish his desires to remain free of it.

Though it is Lord Henry who initially spurs Dorian's quest for eternal youth, it is Dorian who takes action after he has examined Basil's portrait. The creation of the painting strikes fear into Dorian's heart, as he begins to realize that the painting will remain beautiful, but he will not. Dorian is subject to the duration of time, and its effect on him would be catastrophic. Dorian's realization is illustrated in his first reaction to the painting: "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June…If it were only the other way!" (Wilde 65). Dorian's obsession with youth is just beginning to flourish, and he makes his wish to place the passing of time, and the subsequent damage to beauty, on the painting rather than on himself: "If it were I who was always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!" (Wilde 65-6). The reference to the soul seems an appropriate one, as the soul is traditionally considered to be an individual's unphysical entity that exists in a more ethereal setting. Many subscribe to the argument that Dorian's immoral deeds are wholesome enough evidence to illustrate his soul's departure; some would even say his soul was sold. In addition, Basil is often considered to have captured Dorian's soul in the painting. If one considers the soul to be an entity that exists beyond the effects of the fourth dimension, its placement in the painting subjects it to the lower fourth dimension, where the degeneration of youth and morality becomes immensely obvious in the physical manifestation of the painting. This act is only made more complex by the fact that Dorian recognizes that the painting is part of himself, and therefore offers an odd divide in his

character where only one half of the man can be subject to the fourth dimension, which he has consciously wished to place on the physical portrait.

Another important issue relating to Dorian and his existence outside of the fourth dimension is his perception of the passing of time, or rather, his inability to perceive time at all. This becomes clear when he is talking to Basil about his now deceased ex-fiancé, Sibyl Vane. Basil is questioning Dorian's action of going to an opera rather than attending to Sibyl's death when Dorian states, "What is done is done. What is past is past." Basil responds with, "You call yesterday the past?" after which, Dorian gives perhaps the only description of the manner in which he perceives time: "What has the actual lapse of time got to do with it? It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion" (Wilde 143). What a thoughtful reader can see in this passage is that Dorian would prefer to ignore the lapse of time entirely, which may be a large piece of his decision to reflect the fourth dimension's decay on the painting. Dorian exhibits an immense disregard for the passage of time, and rather than be conscious of the events happening around him, Dorian is fully outside of the fourth dimension, yet he states that "the past is the past." In some ways, Dorian does not possess a reliable concept of time and its passing, which yields further evidence to his three-dimensional existence. Like the square that could not perceive the three dimensions of the sphere, Dorian cannot perceive the fourth dimension of time.

Inevitably, time passes and Dorian is physically unaffected by it; he remains as youthful and beautiful as most would remember him. However, the portrait experiences something else entirely. The painting becomes the sole holder of Dorian's immoral tendencies, and it absorbs all of the age, ugliness, and the dreadful appearance of evil that Dorian ought to have throughout the years. Ultimately, Dorian allows Basil to see his greatest work of art in its full monstrous appearance when the painter pays him a visit. This serves as a quintessential moment where the reader is given insight into the ugliness of the painting's change, caused by Dorian's act of placing the effects of age on it:

> "Years ago when I was a boy," said Dorian Gray, crushing the flower in his hand, "you met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks. One day you introduced me to a friend of yours, who explained to me the

> wonder of youth, and you finished a portrait of me that revealed to me the wonder of beauty. In a mad moment that, even now, I don't know whether I regret or not, I made a wish, perhaps you would call it a prayer…" (Wilde 187)

This passage illustrates Dorian's association of youth with beauty, and fully proves the deliberate nature of which Dorian used to remain unaffected by age and the duration of time, yet it is as if he would prefer to blame Basil and Henry for his internal destruction, when in reality, his election to remain unaffected by the fourth dimension caused the transformation of the once beautiful portrait. Dorian exhibits the consistent action of removing himself from responsibility, and in regards to the passage of time, he removes himself from responsibility by exiting the fourth dimension in favor of placing the painting in it.

At the end of the novel Dorian is reflecting on the murder he committed, when in yet another fit of rage, he decides to destroy the painting with the same knife he used to murder Basil. Dorian notes that, "As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace" (Wilde 250). Assumedly, with "monstrous soul-life" Dorian is referring to the painting. The sheer fact that Dorian refers to it so negatively lends a useful glance at his perceptions; additionally, this is yet another reference to the soul, but this time it is called "soul-life." Obviously, the physical painting is thought to be an inanimate object, yet the inclusion of the soul (which exists beyond the fourth dimension) has been manifested in the painting. In order to be free from the painting Dorian believes that its destruction would be as simple as Basil's murder, but even Dorian cannot recognize the painting's existence in a higher dimension, which leaves it untouchable by physical attacks. Though Dorian succeeded in his desire to be perpetually youthful, he could not escape the desire to destroy his doppelganger. Dorian stabs the painting, and when his servants enter the study, they find only a stunning portrait of Dorian Gray as they remember him, and the corpse of an old, wrinkled man with a knife plunged through his heart. This reversal serves as the final placement of time back onto Dorian. The painting, now outside of the fourth dimension, regains its former beauty,

and Dorian, having entered the fourth dimension, now absorbs the years of age and immoral anguish that the painting had previously held in his place.

Overall, the reader can quite easily see that Dorian's progression happens in stages. He begins as a fairly innocent individual, but through his inability to reconcile external influences, he becomes obsessed with the notion of maintaining his youth. This flaw manifests in his constant action of deflecting responsibility, which rests at the heart of his desire to remain untouched by age. The creation of the painting introduces an external object that Dorian uses to take his metaphorical place in the fourth dimension, leaving him free to remain youthful, and unaffected by the passage of time and the weight of the fourth dimension. Finally, when his attempt to destroy the painting fails, the painting exits the fourth dimension and Dorian re-enters it, where the awaiting effects of age and the pressure of time collapse upon him. Though many have constantly examined *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with a perspective that is exclusive to the topics of morality, external-influence, and youth, they have failed in every way to analyze the importance of dimensionality in the story; moreover, the influence of dimensional theory is so rarely associated with Wilde's writing that another layer of depth has been ignored; such is the case in the story of Dorian Gray.

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